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UNCLAS MUSCAT 000607

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: OMAN SETS MINIMUM CAMEL RACING AGE AT 14

REF: MUSCAT 591

1. (U) In an unexpected turn of events April 11, the Chairman of the Oman Equestrian and Camel Association issued a decision mandating a minimum age of 14 years for camel racing jockeys. His Highness Sayyid Asaad bin Tariq al-Said, head of Oman's camel racing association and first cousin of Sultan Qaboos, announced that the decision will be implemented with the start of the new racing season in September and will require participants to present a birth certificate prior to registration. According to authorities, the decision "comes in line with international laws, following the Sultanate's endorsement of the convention on children's rights." This is believed to be the first age limitation ever imposed on the sport in Oman.

2. (SBU) The Muscat-based regional representative for the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), June Kunugi, said she believes that the government is making tremendous strides in proactively addressing camel racing in Oman. Moreover, Kunugi was disappointed that she missed the opportunity to meet with anti-trafficking activist Ansar Burney in his impromptu visit April 8-9 (reftel). The Embassy passed Burney's contact information to her and invited Kunugi to travel with PolOff to meet Burney in the border town of Buraimi, hopefully in the near future. (Note: Kunugi reported having made previous visits to Buraimi without seeing any evidence of camel jockey camps or unchecked children crossing borders. End note.) Kunugi also said that she plans to visit Burney's child jockey rehabilitation center outside Abu Dhabi in the coming week.

3. (U) COMMENT: While its decision does not carry the force of law, the Association is the sole governing body for formal camel races in Oman and should be in a position to enforce its rules. Sayyid Asaad had previously forecast possible changes to address unspecified shortcomings in the sport, but this announcement nevertheless came as something of a surprise. It likely reflects as much the recommendations of Oman's National Committee on the Rights of the Child as it does trends in camel racing regulations taking effect elsewhere in the Gulf.

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